

# Polar Bears

**Polar bears are the largest land carnivores that live today and have a reputation as the only animal that actively hunts humans. If you were a polar bear how would you feel if you had to swim more to catch food because the polar ice you catch seals on has melted? What advice would you give to bear cubs looking for food? What would you say to the humans?**

## Little known facts on the polar bear

- Polar bears naturally live in five different nations; Greenland, Norway, Russia, Alaska and Canada. These countries all signed the 1973 International Agreement for the Conservation of polar bears.
- The white fur polar bears have goes yellow with age. Legend has it that polar bears cover their black noses with their paws when hunting, so that they are harder for prey to see.
- Polar bears are enormously powerful predators and can kill adult walrus. They will also attempt to catch beluga whales when they come up for air at their breathing holes.
- Unlike grizzly bears, polar bears are not territorial. As a result they normally try to avoid confrontations and choose to escape rather than fight.
- Fat polar bears rarely attack humans, whereas hungry bears are known to actively hunt humans, when their usual prey species are not available.

## But why are polar bears important?

- The polar bear is classified as a vulnerable species, with 5 of the 19 polar bear sub-populations getting smaller.
- After the Elkhorn and Staghorn Corals, polar bears have become the third species to be protected under the Endangered Species Act due to climate change.
- Polar bears provide important raw materials for Arctic peoples, including the Inuit. Almost all parts of a polar bear have traditionally been used from clothing, food or fuel for lighting.
- Polar bears are an important indicator of overall arctic ecosystem health.
- They are culturally important in folklore, legend and literature. They are also used as popular icons by products such as Coca Cola and Fox's Glacier Mints.

## How climate change will affect polar bears

- Climate change is the biggest threat to the polar bears because the melting of their sea ice habitat reduces their ability to find sufficient food, resulting in malnutrition or starvation.
- Polar bears hunt seals from a platform of sea ice. Rising temperatures cause the sea ice to melt earlier in the year, meaning the bears have to go back to shore before they have had time to build up the fat reserves needed to see them through the times when food is scarce, in the late summer and early autumn.
- Reduced sea-ice around the North Pole means the bears have to swim over longer distances, which can tire them out and sometimes result in bears drowning.
- Thinner sea ice also breaks more easily so it is harder for bears to reach seals. Less food means that females produce fewer cubs and that their young have lower survival rates.
- Changes in the sea ice affect the ability of pregnant females to build suitable dens for them and their young.
- Warmer winters could also result in dens collapsing.

## The world without polar bears

We would lose our largest land carnivore and a cultural icon.

